Stereotypes of Taiwanese salespeople at the service interface

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Abstract: Stereotypes of salespeople are common currency in US media outlets and research suggests that these stereotypes are uniformly negative. However, there is no reason to expect that stereotypes will be consistent across cultures. The present paper provides the first empirical examination of salesperson stereotypes in an Asian country, specifically Taiwan. Using accepted psychological methods, Taiwanese salesperson stereotypes are found to be twofold, with a negative stereotype being quite congruent with existing US stereotypes, but also a positive stereotype, which may be related to the specific culture of Taiwan.

Keywords: salespeople; stereotypes; international marketing; Taiwan.

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1 Introduction

Buyer-seller relationships have become a dominant theme in marketing because of their importance to long term organisational success and the firm's revenue stream (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Service personnel are often central in these relationships as they are boundary-spanners, interacting with both the organisation and its customers and have the potential to manage this dyad (Boles et al., 2000). These interactions are also linked with the customer's satisfaction with the selling firm and manufacturer (Babin et al., 1999) and are therefore a focus for service strategy.

To acquire information about service providers, customers rely at least in part on some informal theory about a given group of service providers (e.g., expectations about accountants). While this theory can be updated with new information (e.g., meeting a new accountant who behaves counter to expectations), the theory is assumed by consumers to apply to all who provide that service (Matta and Folkes, 2005). One such type of theory that contributes to consumer information is the stereotype. A stereotype is 'a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver's knowledge, beliefs and expectations about a human group' (Hamilton and Trolier, 1986) and can be both positive and negative.

Service personnel have received attention in stereotyping research for a number of reasons including the predominance of females in certain service areas and the stigma associated with staff in specific service industries (see for example, Matta and Folkes, 2005; Wildes, 2005). One particular group of service providers that have to face stereotyping issues are salespeople – those employees whose primary role is to actively work with customers in order to influence them to make a purchase of their company's offerings. Salespeople of various descriptions have proven to be of considerable inspiration to novelists, playwrights, screenwriters and other creative artists over the last century (Falvey, 1985), with characters such as 'Blake' (*Glengarry Glen Ross*), 'Willy Loman' (*Death of a Salesman*) and 'Delboy Trotter' (*Only Fools and Horses*) assuming prominent places in the cultural landscape of the USA, the UK and many other Western cultures. Perhaps these compelling representations of these boundary spanning employees are partly to blame for the overwhelmingly negative stereotype which appears to be associated with salespeople in Western cultures (e.g., Lee et al., 2007; Singhapakdi and Vittell, 1992; Wotruba, 1990). Such negative stereotypes are likely to be harmful to the performance of salespeople themselves and the selling function in general and also to make managing the service

process more difficult. For example, research has found that stereotypes can influence the behaviour of customers in selling encounters (e.g., Babin et al., 1995). Furthermore, negative stereotypes appear to reduce business students' likelihood of taking up selling as a career (DelVecchio and Honeycutt Jr., 2002). Even more insidiously, prior psychological research has found that negative stereotypes may actually influence the psychological and physical health of stereotyped individuals. As a result of this, stereotypes are an important topic when investigating boundary spanning service employees, as they have the potential to influence individual and organisational performance and employee well-being in the workplace. Techniques for managing this service interface continue to be a challenge for organisations. Unsurprisingly, then, stereotypes have proven popular as a topic within the practitioner literature (e.g., Butler, 1996; Cassavoy, 1999; Trumfio, 1994; Young, 2003; Zurier, 1991).

However, in the academic literature, the situation is almost reversed. In fact, while negative stereotypes of salespeople have received some attention, there is little empirical examination of the actual *content* of these stereotypes. Instead, stereotypes are generally assumed to be 'negative', based on pop-cultural references and anecdotal evidence from the practitioner world. Few studies are available which utilise accepted psychological methods to explicate the content of salesperson stereotypes and thus there is a danger of inconsistency in how salesperson stereotypes are modelled and a commensurate lack of comparability between studies (Lee et al., 2007). Furthermore, even the few studies that do give attention to the actual content of salesperson stereotypes do so from a Western perspective (e.g., Babin et al., 1995; Stafford et al., 1995).

Yet it is demonstrably not the case that stereotypes held in one culture are the same as those held in others (McGarty et al., 2002). The cultural environment is likely to have a major impact on the development and reinforcement of stereotypes (Yoon et al., 2000). In particular, there appears to be no concrete information on how salespeople are viewed outside, what can broadly be considered as 'Western' culture at all. With global marketing becoming more and more important for companies and national economies, it is no longer sufficient to assume that knowledge regarding salesperson stereotypes in the USA or UK is adequate to ensure success in other markets.

The present paper reports on an empirical study of stereotypes of salespeople in the Republic of China/Taiwan (referred to as 'Taiwan' hereafter), in an attempt to contribute towards addressing the aforementioned gaps in our knowledge of boundary-spanning service employees. Taiwan is an important and interesting culture to investigate in this context for a number of reasons. Firstly, Taiwan is one of the four 'Asian Tigers', one of the fastest growing and most important economies in the world and ranked highly in terms of competitiveness, GDP per capita and other indicators by organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Economist Intelligence Unit. Furthermore, the underlying cultural frameworks which are prevalent in Taiwan are likely to be very different to those in the West, leaving previous work on stereotypes of little value. The paper begins with a discussion of stereotypes themselves, as well as the role of culture in their formation. Subsequently, we detail our method, which was based on accepted psychological methods (e.g., Andersen and Klatzky, 1987), as used in prior sales research in the USA and UK (e.g., Babin et al., 1995; Lee et al., 2007). Following this, the results are discussed and an agenda for future research in sales stereotypes is presented. Finally, the limitations are presented along with conclusions.

2 Stereotypes and the role of culture in their formation

Stereotypes are defined by psychological theory as the mental representations of overall negative attitudes towards members of groups (Aronson et al., 2004). Thus, stereotypes in a psychological sense are almost by definition negative. However, stereotypes are also considered in a less pejorative manner to be schemas about groups, or mental structures that help an individual to interact socially, by providing quick access to information (Best, 1989). In essence, stereotypes are used by individuals to characterise and categorise those who belong to what are called 'outgroups', i.e., groups to which the categorising individual does not belong (Lee et al., 2007). Nevertheless, this information does not necessarily have to be accurate and in many ways stereotypes can be seen as a trade-off between accuracy of information and the necessary speed of access to that information in social situations. Without mental schemas such as stereotypes, we would be unable to interact successfully in many social situations, even though the information provided by our stereotypes is sometimes inaccurate and biased. Thus, although stereotypes have generally been considered in a negative light, they are unavoidably part of our understanding of the complex social world (Fiske, 2004).

Stereotypes aid individuals in social situations since, where no other information is available; they define for an individual what should be expected from the other party in an interaction. In a sales context, stereotypes of salespeople will be of use to potential customers since they will generally have little knowledge of what to expect from a salesperson, particularly if they have no prior experience with the individual or of salespeople in general. All members of society have knowledge of culturally transmitted stereotypes and this knowledge is generally considered to reduce energy expended on information processing by providing simple ways of categorising people (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). If people had to build completely new impressions of each individual they encountered this process would be arduous and highly time and energy inefficient. By contrast, when stereotypical images are triggered people respond to others more rapidly (Fazio and Olsen, 2003). This leads to smoother social interactions if both parties behave according to their stereotyped roles. However, this is only the case if both parties endorse and behave according to the same stereotype. While stereotypes are generally considered to aid information processing, they may also lead to bias and inaccuracy since stereotypes may often be erroneous and individual characteristics may not conform to stereotyped expectations. Thus, stereotypes can lead to poor assumptions and flawed information processing as a result of the biases they promote (e.g., DelVecchio and Honeycutt Jr., 2002). Furthermore, stereotyped individuals can experience stereotype threat, where they feel intense pressure to conform to expectations, or to disprove them (Aronson et al., 2004).

Negative stereotypes can be reinforced by a number of mechanisms. Firstly, it is common for the behaviour of individuals to wrongly be ascribed to entire outgroup populations. In the sales context this can occur, for example, when highly unethical selling activities by one salesperson are then considered by a customer to be representative of all salespeople. Attribution bias is also a factor (Pettigrew, 1979). Thus, negative behaviours by outgroup members – such as that of the unethical salesperson above – tend to be ascribed to the character of the stereotyped individual, leading to reinforcement of a negative stereotype. By contrast, any positive behaviour by a stereotyped outgroup member will tend to be ascribed to situational factors rather than their character, thus not have any impact on reducing the negativity of a stereotype. For

example, when a salesperson provides some unexpected extra service during a sales encounter, a customer may attribute this to a company policy (e.g., an extra bonus for customer satisfaction) rather than question their previous negative stereotype about salespeople. Stereotypes are also reinforced by the remembrance of different types of behaviour. More specifically, information which is congruent with stereotyped expectations (e.g., unethical selling) is more likely to be remembered than information which contradicts those expectations (e.g., customer orientation of salespeople). Information which does not conform to the stereotype is more likely to be dismissed as an exception and in this way negative stereotypes are reinforced and are thus resistant to change (Aronson et al., 2004).

Stereotypes promote inter-group differences, which in turn strengthen intra-group cohesion (Fiske, 2004). Culturally-shared stereotypes assist individuals in building a group identity, by acting as shared shorthand in conversation and providing easy to understand definitions of outgroups. Stereotypes are a feature of human social interaction in general; however, they vary in both content and relevance across different cultures and time periods (Lee et al., 2007). As well as this, stereotypes change as the interrelationships between sub-cultural groups also evolve. This means that simply assuming salespeople's stereotypes to be generally 'negative' or 'pushy' is not enough, empirical research is needed to ascertain the content of stereotypes. Furthermore, stereotypes in one culture are unlikely to be shared in another. For example, it is generally accepted that a major part of stereotype formation occurs in childhood and some suggest that children even form stereotypes about groups prior to coming into contact with them (e.g., Tajfel, 1982). One of the key factors in primary stereotype formation is the stereotypes which are held by parents, although these stereotypes may not be held into adulthood in many cases (Rohan and Zanna, 1996). Thus, it can be seen that cultural values, which are transmitted by parents and others in a child's small social circle, will have a considerable bearing on stereotype formation.

As young people gradually become socialised into their culture, they must learn the ideas and values which are required to communicate within that culture. Many of these ingroup cultural norms and ideas are contained within various stereotypes of other, outgroups. Thus, stereotypes are shared amongst members of a particular culture and allow members to understand the world in a similar way and communicate with each other (Aronson et al., 2004). In this way, stereotypes are culture bound, so much so, in fact, that Pettigrew (1958) suggested that prejudices – of which stereotypes are a major part, as mentioned earlier – actually change when individuals move to different locations.

There are many other ways in which stereotypes are bound up with and reinforced with, culture. For example, stereotypes are commonly reinforced through media representations (Hogg and Vaughan, 2002). Since popular media and culture rely on using commonly-understood ideas and representations to communicate with their audience, stereotypes are common fodder. Media representation thus tends to strengthen stereotypes by using them to develop popular and easily understood characters and representations. Historical activity and representations are also likely to have considerable impact on the formation of stereotypes. In particular, different cultures have different 'cultural heroes', who are often the subject of children's stories and the like (e.g., Hofstede, 1997). For example, whether warriors or merchants are held in high regard in a culture will have an impact on whether stereotypes of soldiers or businesspeople are negative or not. Differing business values are also likely to have

an impact on salesperson stereotypes across cultures. For example, if the model of selling in one country is consultative and relationship-focussed, this may lead to a different stereotype of salespeople than a more aggressive, selling-oriented sales model.

While it could be considered that there may be some overlap between US and say, UK stereotypes of salespeople, due to some common cultural values, media sources or business values, the same is highly unlikely between US stereotypes and the stereotypes within the various Asian cultures. Even at the most simplistic level, Asian countries such as China, Korea and Taiwan are considered to be 'Confucian' (e.g., Hofstede, 1997), with cultural values generally accepted to differ considerably from those which are prevalent in countries such as the USA. Unlike what has become characterised as 'Western' culture, which emphasises individualism and competition, the Confucian framework stresses balance and harmony (Gong, 2003). Furthermore, individuals in the Confucian culture are considered as interconnected through ties of reciprocity, sentiment and kinship (Joy, 2001). There is also importance placed on the concept of 'face' within this system or, in other words, the importance of social consequences of any interaction – how one appears to others in one's reference groups (Hsu, 1985).

The values of the Confucian system seem likely to influence a somewhat different stereotype of salespeople from that which has been discovered in Western cultures. For example, we could expect that the values of balance, harmony and reciprocity could influence a more positive, consultative stereotype of salespeople in Taiwan. This is in contrast to the typical 'pushy' or aggressive US stereotype (e.g., Babin et al., 1995). The long-term perspective implied by Confucian values of reciprocity and balance could mean that salespeople are seen as 'partners' in Taiwan, rather than adversaries or competitors as they appear to be in the USA.

Hofstede and Bond (1988) considered Confucian countries such as Taiwan to be high on power distance and collectivism, which is also likely to be influential in terms of stereotypes. For example, high power distance cultures tend to rely heavily on personal sources of information rather than past experiences (Doran, 2002). In such a situation, consumers may tend to rely heavily on personal contact with salespeople, who may be seen as having superior product knowledge. Thus, customers expect they can gain some benefit from salespeople, which may result in more positive, respectful, stereotypes of salespeople who may be seen as having privileged product knowledge. In terms of collectivism, previous research has argued that consumers in such cultures expect sellers to communicate frequently and also to reward loyalty, even to demonstrate a caring attitude (Nakata and Sivakumar, 2001). In this sense, again, more positive stereotypes of salespeople may be prevalent, since this would link with cultural expectations of their role.

Thus, it can be seen that there is little reason to expect knowledge of US or UK stereotypes (e.g., Babin et al., 1995; Lee et al., 2007; Stafford et al., 1995) to be transferable to Taiwan, or other non-Western cultures. Since stereotypes are an important aspect of consumer information processing and have been found to influence behaviour and attitudes in sales encounters (Babin et al., 1995), the examination of national stereotypes of salespeople is of some importance to both researchers and practitioners in the sales area. Thus, the objectives of this study were to develop a set of robust and rigorously derived stereotype descriptors derived from the Taiwanese cultural context. The balance of the present paper reports the results of a two-stage study designed to this end. The study method first utilised a projective technique to gather a wide variety of

information about stereotypes, followed by a stage where the relevance of this information was tested across a larger sample.

3 Study 1: methodology

The first stage of the study used a projective word association technique. This technique has been used to investigate stereotypes in the past by psychological and sales researchers (e.g., Andersen and Klatzky, 1987; Babin et al., 1995). The technique is aimed at developing a set of 'most associated characteristics' (MACs) of salespeople. Each respondent was asked to write down the words which first came to mind in association with the word 'salesperson'. Congruous with Lee et al. (2007), respondents were not instructed to refer to a particular 'type' of selling, since we felt at this exploratory stage, it was more important to explore general stereotypes without priming respondents. Respondents were instructed to write only the words that first came to mind, since previous research has suggested that these immediate, 'top-of-mind' recalls are most representative of subjects' actual opinions (e.g., Stafford and Stafford, 2003). Nevertheless, in order to avoid self-censorship, respondents were told that they should not restrict the number of terms they wrote down. Respondents were asked to write down words relating to three categories; the physical appearance of salespeople, general characteristics of salespeople and emotions which come to mind in relation to salespeople.

The sample consisted of 55 respondents who were solicited by an intercept methodology by a single researcher who visited 13 department stores in Taiwan. In order to account for any possible gender bias, we aimed to get a generally even split between males and females. Furthermore, a screening question was asked regarding the ethnic origin of the respondents, due to the primacy of culture in our theory. Twenty-one (21) males and 34 females responded. All respondents were Taiwanese and their ages ranged between over 21 and over 51. Education levels ranged from junior high school to bachelor's degree and a wide range of occupations were reported. While previous research in this field has used samples of students from a single school or class (e.g., Babin et al., 1995; Lee et al., 2007), the present study has the advantage of having what is likely to be a less homogenous sample, which should provide access to a wider range of information regarding cultural stereotypes. The latter goal is important for the projective stage, where we are attempting to tap as wide a range of cultural values as possible.

4 Study 1: results

Since the respondents were not asked to edit their responses, it was necessary to control for potential redundancy in the terms given. Specifically, the same particular stereotype characteristic or feature may be expressed in a number of different ways and subjects often 'chain' these responses together when expressing them (Cantor and Walter, 1979). In the present case, this was particularly relevant due to the language of the respondents. In fact, a single Chinese idiom may include several meanings at the same time. In order to deal with this, the responses were translated into English, resulting in 98 potential MACs.

Table 1 Most associated characteristics (MACs)

Traits	
Negative	*Positive*
• Talkative	• Clever
• Aggressive	• Outgoing
• Annoying	• Enthusiastic
• Lack of product knowledge	• Patient
• Persistent	• Straightforward
• Obsequious	• Customer-oriented
• Forceful	• Open-minded
• Fast-talking	• Professional
• Self-serving	• Smiley
• False	• Sincere
• Judgemental	• Perceptive
• Pushy	• Friendly
• Persuasive	• Polite
• Snobbish	• Kind
	• Confident
	• Trustworthy
Physical characteristics	
Negative	*Positive*
• Over-dressed	• Good looking
• Unfashionable	• Elegant
	• Clean and Tidy
	• Smartly dressed
Emotions	
Negative	*Positive*
• Helpless	• Satisfied
• Timid	• Happy
• Annoyed	
• Impatient	
• Powerless	
• Embarrassed	
• Stressed	
• Sympathetic	

The procedure for redundancy control was as follows. Firstly, one English-speaking academic reviewer was given a list of all 98 potential MACs and asked to sort terms which he thought referred to the same characteristic into single groups, naming each group. A second academic expert was then given a list of the 'redundant' MACs and the group names suggested by the first reviewer. The second reviewer was asked to relocate the 'redundant' MACs into the groups suggested by the first reviewer, without knowledge of which MACs the first reviewer had put into the groups (see Andersen and Klatzky, 1987). The list of MACs resulting from this two-stage redundancy analysis was reduced significantly from 98 to 47 and this list is shown in Table 1. The number of MACs reported here is thus considerably more than previous research. For example, Lee et al., (2007) report 29 MACs in their UK study.

As can be seen (Table 1), there appears some interesting variation in the descriptors that are used here, particularly in light of existing 'Western' stereotypes which are generally seen as overwhelmingly negative. However, it must be noted that there was some variety across the sample in terms of the responses, although it was interesting that many respondents provided a mix of positive and negative statements. This suggests that Taiwanese stereotypes may consistently have both positive and negative aspects, rather than different people having either wholly positive or negative opinions – which would suggest that individual experiences may have been more important in their opinion formation than commonly-held stereotypes. It is particularly interesting to see the number of positive descriptors for salespeople which were given by the Taiwanese respondents. This is in strong contrast to Babin et al.'s (1995) US-based research, which generally found overwhelmingly negative stereotypes for salespeople. These results here would suggest that Taiwanese individuals may have a certain respect for salespeople and even some trust in them. Interestingly, in high power-distance cultures, consumers do tend to have longer-term relationships with salespeople, which could influence these stereotypes. Furthermore, emotions of embarrassment and sympathy were mentioned, which could indicate that consumers in Taiwan may consider selling to be a hard job and also one in which the interpersonal situation is somewhat awkward, i.e., persuading those in close relationships (implied by the Confucian culture) to purchase products.

5 Study 2: methodology

The MACs presented in Table 1 are the raw material which can be used to examine the content of Taiwanese stereotypes. However, following identification of the MACs, it is necessary to discover which ones are most closely associated with the Taiwanese stereotype of salespeople. This is particularly relevant given the variety of descriptors which have been returned in Study 1. In order to do this, the 47 MACs were operationalised in a questionnaire and respondents were asked to rate the applicability of each characteristic to their opinion of salespeople (e.g., Andersen and Klatzky, 1987). Each MAC was contained in a separate statement such as 'the salesperson would look elegant' and respondents used a five-point Likert-type scale to rate the applicability of each statement, with anchors of the scale 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (Babin et al., 1995). The statements were randomly ordered to avoid possible bias (cf. Andersen and Klatzky, 1987). The questionnaires were originally written in English, translated into Chinese and then, translated back by another person. While this process is not perfect, it stands the best chance of minimising potential errors (Craig and Douglas, 2001).

Questionnaires were distributed via the internet. Specifically, a banner advertisement referring to the questionnaire was posted on several websites which were exclusively for Taiwanese respondents (although a screening question was also asked at the beginning of the questionnaire). No material incentives were used to encourage response but an emotional appeal was made to potential respondents regarding the importance of this data to the completion of one of the research team's postgraduate degree. In order to encourage response further, those who agreed to participate in the research were sent two reminder emails (one week and three weeks after their intial agreement). Thus, like many samples collected via electronic means, in technical terms this is a convenience sample rather than a probability sample, with a possible bias towards more technically literate respondents. However, it does have the advantage of being reasonably heterogeneous compared to the student samples used in previous work on stereotypes (e.g., Andersen and Klatzky, 1987; Babin et al., 1995; Stafford et al., 1995). Furthermore, Calder et al. (1981) argue that for the purposes of general theoretical testing rather than generalising effects to a specific context, any respondent group can provide data. Since the objectives of the present study are to provide a general examination of stereotypes, there do not appear any *a priori* issues with the sample itself. Nevertheless, the internet methodology does make it considerably more difficult to calculate the response rate and there is a possibility that older respondents are less likely to fill in the questionnaire. Examining the demographic characteristics of the 188 respondents does seem to bear this out, with less than 10% of respondents over 51. However, the demographic characteristics of the sample are quite diverse, with 77 males and 111 females, aged between under 20 and over 51. Education ranged from junior high school to master's degree and there were a wide variety of occupations, ranging in annual income from under NT$250,000 to over NT$1 Million (New Taiwanese Dollars).

6 Study 2: results

A one-sample t-test was used to select which of the MACs was most representative of Taiwanese salesperson stereotypes. All MACs which returned results either significantly above or below the midpoint of the scale (3) were considered as potential content of the salesperson stereotypes. The significant MACs are presented in Table 2. Those MACs significantly below the midpoint (italicised in Table 2) are likely to represent either characteristics which are *opposite* to the typical stereotype or on the other hand, representative of *atypical* sales people. Either way, they are likely to provide useful information in constructing profiles for future work (Lee et al., 2007).

Table 2 T-test results for MACs

Most associated characteristic	*T-value*	*Sig.*	*Mean dif.*
Physical characteristics			
Clean and tidy	17.47	0.00	1.06
Dressed smartly	14.33	0.00	0.90
Unfashionable	*–10.99*	*0.00*	*–0.77*
Good looking	10.28	0.00	0.65
Over-dressed	2.46	0.02	0.18

Table 2 T-test results for MACs (continued)

Most associated characteristic	*T-value*	*Sig.*	*Mean dif.*
Traits			
Persuasive	17.1	0.00	0.92
Outgoing	13.88	0.00	0.85
Aggressive	11.21	0.00	0.77
Talkative	10.81	0.00	0.75
Sales-oriented	8.01	0.00	0.62
Smiley	7.37	0.00	0.49
Confident	7.31	0.00	0.44
Self-serving	6.52	0.00	0.46
Kind	5.86	0.00	0.39
Clever	5.67	0.00	0.35
Polite	5.67	0.00	0.38
False	5.6	0.00	0.40
Perceptive	5.56	0.00	0.41
Unknowledgeable	–5.51	0.00	–0.35
Sincere	4.24	0.00	0.30
Straightforward	*–3.889*	*0.00*	*–0.30*
Friendly	3.8	0.00	0.24
Snobbish	3.6	0.00	0.25
Fast-talking	3.53	0.00	0.26
Enthusiastic	3.24	0.00	0.24
Persistent	2.85	0.01	0.21
Obsequious	2.65	0.01	0.21
Forceful	2.64	0.01	0.20
Trustworthy	*–2.36*	*0.02*	*–0.16*
Annoying	2.34	0.02	0.15
Emotions			
Feel stressed	10.97	0.00	0.81
Feel annoyed	*–7.20*	*0.00*	*–0.44*
Feel happy	*–2.40*	*0.02*	*–0.13*
Feel sympathetic towards	2.12	0.04	0.18

It is interesting to note that there is a large number of positive MACs rated highly by the respondents as indicative of a stereotypical salesperson. This is in contrast to anecdotal perceptions of US sales stereotypes and the stereotype content found empirically in the USA (Babin et al., 1995). In particular, similar to UK findings (e.g., Lee et al., 2007), Taiwanese stereotypes seem to contain more positive perceptions of appearance than US ones. Unique to these Taiwanese results, though, is a greater expectation of friendliness and general pleasantness, as well as intelligence. What is perhaps most interesting is that there was at least some perception of trustworthiness found here (although this was

balanced by the presence of some other traits), in contrast to existing stereotypes of sales in the West. However, it also seems clear that there are some considerable negative stereotypes in Taiwan about salespeople, which are generally similar to those which have been found in the USA previously. For example, Taiwanese consumers also expected stereotypical salespeople to be aggressive, persistent, self-serving and fast-talking, which would be recognised as stereotypical salesperson behaviour by most US consumers as well. Only two of the emotional characteristics returned means significantly above the midpoint and it was interesting to note that one of these was 'feel sympathetic towards'. Further, 'feel annoyed' returned a mean significantly below the midpoint. Taken together these latter two results could be considered as another indication that Taiwanese salesperson stereotypes may be more positive than existing Western ones. However, consumers were also adamant that they would be stressed as well in an interaction and that they would not be happy. This could relate to the importance of 'face' in the Confucian culture prevalent in Taiwan. With interpersonal relationships assuming prominence here, the sales interaction is one in which many mistakes and misunderstandings can occur, and 'face' is easy to lose.

7 Discussion

It can be seen then, that stereotypes of salespeople in Taiwan appear quite different from the anecdotal and empirical representations of US and UK stereotypes (e.g., Babin et al., 1995; Lee et al., 2007). While there appears to be a stereotype of salespeople who are aggressive and annoying (similar to US representations), there is a significant amount of positivity, evident in the Taiwanese results. In appearance, Taiwanese stereotypes show that salespeople are expected to be good looking and well dressed – similar to US stereotypes – although there was also a perception that they could be a little overdressed. It is difficult to reconcile the considerable contrast between negative and positive responses and this could therefore indicate the existence of *two* primary stereotypes of salespeople existing in Taiwan. More specifically, one stereotype seems to be the 'classic' anecdotal representation of the aggressive, flattering, self-serving salesperson. Conversely, it seems clear that there also exists a stereotype of the friendly, clever, polite, sincere salesperson in Taiwan – which simply does not appear to exist in the USA.

The discovery of this 'positive' salesperson stereotype provides evidence to support the assertion that salesperson stereotypes are culture-bound and are influenced by cultural values of the specific environment. For instance, the existence of characteristics such as 'kind', 'friendly' and 'sincere' seems likely to be related to the prevalence of longer-term relationships between salespeople and customers and higher need for personal sources of information in high power distance cultures such as Taiwan. This is likely to relate to more favourable perceptions of salespeople as intelligent and pleasant. The positive stereotype of salespeople could also be related to the inherent interconnectedness of individuals within the Confucian social structure, which could influence more positive perceptions of salespeople as 'partners' rather than adversaries.

Indeed, in light of the characteristics of Taiwanese culture, one could consider that the presence of the negative stereotype is more unexpected than the positive one. The presence of negative perceptions of salespeople could relate to the increasing presence of US business models and practices in Taiwan and other Asian countries, which has been commented on by a number of authors (e.g., Harvey 1999). Furthermore, as

communications and media become more globalised, it could be expected that Taiwanese consumers may be more likely to be exposed to US-centric media, which could also influence a more negative stereotype.

One could use the stereotype descriptions uncovered herein in a variety of ways, although it is most common to see them operationalised in scenarios (e.g. Babin et al., 1995; Stafford et al., 1995). Table 3 presents three different stereotypical descriptions which could be used for comparative research: the 'positive typical salesperson', the 'negative typical salesperson' and the 'atypical salesperson'. The 'atypical' description is designed for experimental purposes as a contrast to the 'typical' descriptions. However, there are a variety of ways which stereotype descriptions could be constructed, depending on the research goals. For example, Lee et al. (2007) construct an 'unpleasant' stereotype to go with their 'typical' and 'atypical'. The use of the MACs in Table 2 here to construct the three descriptions is an example only. Nevertheless, the use of consistent, robustly-developed stereotypes in future research will allow a clearer picture to emerge regarding the influence of stereotypes on key outcomes, as well as the concurrent influence of other characteristics.

Table 3 Example stereotype descriptors

	Stereotype		
	Positive	*Negative*	*Atypical**
Characteristics of stereotypical salesperson	*Appearance*		
	Smartly dressed	Overdressed	Well-dressed
	Good-looking	Good-looking	Average-looking
	Traits		
	Sincere	Obsequious	Seems honest
	Talkative	Fast-talking	At an average speed
	Smiley	Aggressive	Slightly shy
	Friendly	Snobbish	Down-to-earth
	Kind	Annoying	Pleasant
	Enthusiastic	Forceful	Passive
	Clever	Self-serving	Customer-focussed

Notes: For the purposes of illustration we have developed the atypical stereotype related to the 'negative' typical stereotype – other research purposes may need different or additional atypical stereotypes. Furthermore, we have chosen a subset of characteristics for parsimony reasons; again, other research tasks may use others.

8 Conclusions and directions for future research

The results presented here have some important implications for marketing practitioners and researchers. The service interface is a crucial component of the firm's external representation to consumers and other stakeholders and negative stereotypes of any part of this interface are therefore of concern. Consequently, while stereotypes in the context of this study are fundamentally consumers' schemas, it would appear that managers can take some actions to influence salespeople's behaviours in relation to such schemas. It would seem particularly important to design motivational strategies to avoid influencing

behaviour which reinforces negative stereotypes. For example, compensation schemes which emphasise teamwork and long-term service may help avoid the self-serving behaviour seen here as a key part of the negative salesperson stereotype. Measures such as this should help ensure a positive service delivery which is in line with organisational strategies. Sales staff is a critical part of most firms' service interface and managers need to be aware of how they are perceived by potential customers.

However, it is also clear from the results of this study that perceptions of salespeople are by no means uniform across multiple cultures. It is heartening to know that in some cultures salespeople are not uniformly held in low regard by the population and may even be thought of in a positive light. Sales managers operating in Taiwan should take care that their salespeople conform more strongly to the positive stereotype than the negative one. This is of particular relevance since behaving in congruence with stereotyped expectations has a positive influence on the social interaction process and can help put customers at ease. Taiwanese salespeople have a chance to do this in a positive manner, in contrast to US salespeople who have to contend with an almost wholly-negative stereotype. That being said, it is concerning that there exist some highly negative perceptions of salespeople in Taiwan, which would not appear to concur with many aspects of the Taiwanese culture. While one can only speculate, it is possible that this is a result of the influence of Western business models on Taiwanese business culture. Managers should be aware of the potential for harm that poor selling behaviour can do to perceptions of salespeople and stress the importance of conforming to relationship and customer-oriented selling techniques in cultures such as Taiwan. Researchers can also draw heavily from this work. In particular, we provide strong evidence that stereotypes differ across cultures and that it is insufficient merely to apply existing US-centric methods to problems in different cultures. Secondly, the information provided here should enable future work to carry out further and more detailed work on stereotypes and their influence in Taiwan, building from a consistent foundation.

Future research should proceed on a number of paths. Firstly, it would seem important to examine stereotypes of salespeople in other cultures, since there is clearly no reason to expect them to be consistent with those which have been found in the USA. Secondly, work should proceed in Taiwan on explicating the consequences of these stereotypes. For example, do students perceive the negative or positive aspects more strongly and will this influence their likelihood of taking up a selling career, as has been found in the USA? As well as this, future research should investigate whether different 'types' of salespeople are associated with different stereotypes. For example, are car salespeople perceived more negatively than retail salespeople? This could help explain the positivity of some aspects of the stereotype uncovered here. Further work could also investigate whether there are differences in salesperson stereotypes across different population or demographic groups, such as males and females, or those with different occupations or education levels. Finally, how do salespeople perceive themselves? Does conforming to either of the two main stereotypes have different influences on key consumer outcomes?

In conclusion, this paper has provided important information on the content of salesperson stereotypes outside the USA and appears to be the first to empirically examine stereotypes of salespeople in an Asian country. Future research should build on this foundation in order to further explore salesperson stereotypes and their influence in environments outside the USA.

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